

**Title: “Accidental activists: Headhunters as marginal diversity actors in institutional change towards more women on boards”**

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# **Accidental activists: Headhunters as marginal diversity actors in institutional change towards more women on boards**

## **ABSTRACT**

We present a qualitative study that examines the role of headhunters as actors in a broader institutional change process aiming to increase gender diversity on corporate boards. We draw on institutional and diversity management theories to conceptualize their change agency in the broader field of women on boards. We describe their role as ‘accidental activists’ and theorize two micro-processes that define their change agency in this field: voluntaristic framing of intentionality and role redefinition by drawing on competing logics. This conceptualization does not match the heroic image of the institutional entrepreneur driving institutional change, or that of the tempered radical championing diversity, but rather casts light into a marginal and previously neglected change role. We demonstrate the opportunistic and precarious nature of this role with regards to both institutional change and diversity management, and discuss its possibilities and perils.

**Key words:** Institutional change, change agency, headhunters, women on boards, diversity management

## **Introduction**

Mounting international pressure to increase the share of women on boards (WoB) has led scholars to examine national institutional factors that account for varying proportions of WoB (Grosvold & Brammer, 2011) and for the introduction of remedial policies such as gender board quotas (Terjesen et al., 2015). While this emerging literature begins to identify macro-level drivers of institutional change in the field of WoB, it lacks a closer examination of the role of institutional actors in driving this change (Seierstad et al., 2015). Actor-focused perspectives are important in understanding the unfolding of institutional change processes

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(Battilana et al., 2009) as actors actively interpret logics, create new practices and engage in institutional work that maintains or disrupts institutions (Lawrence et al., 2011). Seierstad et al. (2015) note the importance of politicking processes among multiple actors in creating institutional change in the WoB field across several countries.

Using the UK as the empirical context for our study, we examine an unusual institutional change role emerging in this setting – the role of headhunters as change actors in the field of WoB. Headhunters were identified as key actors in changing the composition of boards in a wider institutional change process triggered by the Davies Review on WoB (2011), which spurred them into an unwitting change role. The mandate to make board selection more inclusive was at odds with the logics and practices of headhunters, who typically enforce board homogeneity by resorting to narrow pools of candidates (Hamori, 2010) and by emphasizing social fit when assessing candidates (Khurana, 2002). We aimed to understand how headhunters assumed their novel role and contributed to this change process, (a) despite being ‘thrown’ into it and not intentionally driving the institutional change (Lawrence et al., 2011) and (b) despite typically reinforcing the status quo among corporate elites (Faulconbridge et al, 2009).

To explore this, we utilized conceptual tools from two literatures: institutional change and diversity management. Recent institutional scholarship focuses on the role of individual agency in shaping social structures and processes that underpin institutional arrangements, with a focus on institutional entrepreneurs (Lawrence et al, 2011; Maguire et al, 2004). Diversity scholarship examines the role of individuals engaged in diversity work by unpacking their rhetorical and practical strategies (Kirton et al, 2007; Tatli, 2011), but tends to focus on actors who operate within organizations, whose primary remit is diversity management. We sought to understand how headhunters contribute to a change agenda

related to WoB, without driving change as institutional entrepreneurs (IEs), and without having diversity management as their primary role. Both institutional change and diversity management literatures undertheorize institutional and diversity work done ‘from the margins’; therefore, examining headhunters’ role in the WoB field expands and enriches conceptualisations of change agency in both of these literatures.

Our study draws on qualitative interviews with key actors in the field, observations, and secondary documents pertaining to the role of headhunters in the WoB change agenda. Based on our analysis, we conceptualize headhunters as ‘accidental activists’ (AAs) in the field and reveal two micro-processes that define their agency: (1) the voluntaristic framing of intentionality and (2) role redefinition, by drawing on competing logics related to diversity management and executive selection. We compare accidental activism to other conceptions of agency and draw out the motivation and strategies used by AAs. In relation to institutional theory, we demonstrate that accidental activism differs from established conceptualizations of institutional entrepreneurship (Battilana et al, 2009) and relies on the opportunistic utilization of competing logics. In relation to diversity scholarship, we chart the role of actors involved in diversity work from outside organizations and we explain how this novel diversity role differs from ‘tempered radicalism’ – a concept used to describe the agency of internal diversity actors (Scully and Meyerson, 1995; Kirton et al., 2007). The AA role we theorize may be pivotal to the institutional change and the diversity agenda, despite being opportunistic. We discuss its opportunities and perils.

In subsequent sections, we consider research on institutional work, diversity work, and executive search. Next, we explain the study’s context and the methods used. Findings are organized around two key themes that describe how headhunters frame their intentions

and enact their new role. We finish by discussing the study's theoretical and practical implications.

### **Change agents doing institutional work**

Recent institutional scholarship attempts to theorize the agency of actors who transform institutions by focusing on the role of IEs as individuals who instigate change in “fields in crisis” (Fligstein, 1997), strategize counter-hegemonic challenges (Levy & Scully, 2007), create new norms and legitimize new roles (Reay, et.al, 2006; Delbridge & Edwards, 2008). Central to the work of IEs is the notion of institutional logics - shared understanding of the goals pursued and the means to pursue them (Battilana et al., 2009). Institutional logics are powerful because they encapsulate the interests, values, assumptions and identities of individuals and organizations, providing legitimacy and scripts for action (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). Thus, logics constrain and regulate individual and collective behaviour, providing opportunities for change and agency. Efforts to transform fields entail power struggles between competing logics (Reay & Hining, 2005). Aiming to disrupt institutions, IEs purposefully identify and exploit contradictory logics (Seo & Creed, 2002), and develop narratives that encapsulate old and new logics supporting their change agenda (Batillana et al., 2009). Logics are therefore important because they enable IEs (and potentially other change protagonists) to articulate the need for change and to mobilize resources towards it.

Despite its focus on IEs, institutional scholarship is progressing towards a more nuanced understanding of the institutional work undertaken by a variety of actors engaged in institutional change (Battilana et al., 2009; Lawrence et al., 2011). A useful lens for examining the micro-processes of institutional work is Callero's (1994) role theory, stating that roles do not only bound agency through their normative expectations, but also enable

actors to exert (change) agency through the resources and power embedded in them. Drawing on Callero (1994), Creed et al. (2010) demonstrate how actors can “claim” and “use” roles to shape institutional structures. Rather than focusing on the heroic aspects of championing change, Creed et al. (2010) evidence how individuals embody institutional change through micro-processes and tactics such as identity work and role redefinition. Moving beyond ‘grand accounts of institutions and agency’ (Lawrence et al., 2011, p. 52) could provide more nuanced understandings of how different forms of agency – beyond IEs – combine to shape institutions. Extant studies theorize how IEs spearhead change by championing new values, scripts and norms that legitimize their change agendas and crystallize into new logics governing institutions (Reay et.al, 2006; Delbridge & Edwards, 2008). However, Batillana et al. (2009) argue that institutional theory would be strengthened by addressing a gap in our understanding of how marginal actors (beyond IEs) seek legitimacy and use logics to respond and contribute to changing institutional fields, without necessarily leading from the front. Furthermore, while logics articulate *why* institutional actors might embark on change, the actual tactics employed through role redefinition may reveal *how* actors implement this change in practice. Our study aims to address this theoretical gap empirically by examining the institutional work of marginal actors, in this case headhunters, who do not identify with the change occurring in the WoB field, but who are drawn into the process by a bold IE. We turn to literatures on diversity management and executive recruitment to examine what logics and tactics shape the work of headhunters in the WoB field.

### **Diversity actors driving change**

Despite the multiplicity of diversity management policies, diversity remains a controversial cause within organizations. Individuals with formal diversity roles (diversity specialists and champions) suffer professional costs such as marginalization, reputational

damage and career stagnation (Kirton & Greene, 2009). Diversity scholarship is thus preoccupied with the rhetorical and practical strategies used to implement diversity policies and create change. Oswick and Noon (2014) observe three discursive trends in the field over a 40-year period: an early equality discourse, a diversity discourse, and a more recent inclusion discourse – all proffering different anti-discrimination solutions. Each discourse emerged and gained prominence by denigrating the established approach and stressing its distinctiveness from it. Oswick and Noon's conceptualization of diversity discourses bears resemblance to the notion of institutional logics offered by institutional theorists. Akin to logics, discourses legitimize action and dictate interactions between players in a field, providing frameworks for action to those doing diversity work. In the UK, diversity arguments (Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2011) largely draw on voluntaristic and business case logics, despite a general shift towards board quotas across EU countries.

The notion of tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) was used to theorize the agency of diversity actors, because it acknowledges the change agenda embedded in diversity work and the potentially unpopular change role of diversity professionals. Tempered radicals are committed to their organization and career, but personally invested in a social justice cause incongruous with their organization's culture. In reconciling these commitments, they adopt incremental strategies that both protect their identities and create organizational change. Similarly, diversity professionals are defined by ambivalence and the dual pressure of changing the status quo while operating effectively within the organizational structures they aim to alter, by integrating equality and business case logics to reach different constituencies (Kirton et al., 2007). Tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) and diversity professionals specifically (Kirton et al., 2007), utilize seemingly unremarkable change strategies such as small wins and informal negotiations. This suggests that diversity

work entails the use of cautious and somewhat covert change tactics, in addition to the use of fashionable discourses mentioned earlier (Oswick & Noon, 2014).

Therefore, diversity scholarship has largely focused on internal diversity actors, unpacking the discourses and strategies they use to sell and implement diversity, and portraying them as proactive and mission-driven. Although recent studies highlight the importance of extra-organizational bodies in progressing diversity in general (Tatli et al., 2015), and at board level (Seierstad et al., 2015), there is limited insight into the role of external diversity actors such as headhunters whose mandate is not diversity but who may get co-opted into diversity work.

### **Institutional logics and diversity in executive selection**

Executive search firms identify and hire difficult-to-find executive and non-executive directors for top roles (Hamori, 2010). Executive selection is described as a 'social matching' process (Khurana, 2002) partially informed by impressions of social 'fit' and 'chemistry' (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998), that drive headhunters towards risk-averse recruitment strategies and perpetuate current corporate elites. Headhunters 'gate-keep' executive movement and control the elite labour market by mediating the relationship between candidates and client organisations and by promulgating certain definitions of talent (Faulconbridge et al., 2009) that are often gendered (Tienari et al., 2013). The executive search sector seems to jeopardize diversity rather than foster it, through exclusionary and subjective practices and the logic of social matching. Thus, the UK context created an intriguing situation, whereby executive search firms were cast as diversity actors meant to facilitate the appointment of more WoB.

To summarise our theoretical considerations, institutional theory suggests that change occurs through the strategic actions of IEs, while diversity management scholarship suggests that diversity management is driven by internal actors committed to the cause. Both



perspectives are informative in understanding change agency; we draw on them to examine the agency of marginal actors who contribute to institutional change and diversity agendas, without being IEs or internal diversity professionals. Informed by these two literatures, our research questions are: (1) To what extent and how do marginal actors engage in institutional change? (2) What is the nature of diversity work for actors who work outside organizations and have no diversity agenda?

## **Research context**

Our study focuses on the changing context of diversity on FTSE 100 boards in the UK, where the 2011 Davies Review on WoB changed the national debate on this issue. As a result, the percentage of WoB doubled between 2011-2015 (Figure 1), and over 30% of new board appointments went to women (Figure 2).

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 here]

Appointed by government, Lord Davies was supported by a Steering Committee of experts from business and academia. The Davies Report outlined a national strategy to ensure more women were appointed onto boards, setting a target of 25% for FTSE 100 boards by 2015. The report set a change agenda for several stakeholders in the field, including headhunters. Constant monitoring by the Steering Committee and high-profile events enabled accountability and coordination across key players. In this context, the Davies Review acted as a precipitating jolt for institutional change (destabilizing established practices related to corporate board diversity), followed by de-institutionalization (the emergence of new actors designated by the Davies Review as key stakeholders in changing these practices). As the IE, Lord Davies instigated the change, framed the conversation, and galvanized other players into action, giving over 300 speeches to senior business leaders between 2011-2015. The Davies

Report recommended that search firms draft up a Voluntary Code of Conduct (hereafter referred to as ‘the Code’) to insure more gender-inclusive board appointments. Five leading firms were cajoled into drafting the Code; a dozen others provided input on the draft. In July 2011 the Code was published and signed by 20 search companies. This process was championed and facilitated by the Davies Committee. The Code underwent revisions in 2013 and by 2015 over 80 firms had signed up to it. These developments formally placed headhunters as diversity actors in the WoB field.

### **Case study approach**

We adopted a case study approach (Yin, 2012), to gain a context-sensitive understanding of the agency of headhunters as marginal institutional change and diversity actors in the WoB field. The case selection was dictated by the fact that the issue field of WoB in the UK created a laboratory for this new role, making it possible to observe a novel type of change agency. Our timeframe was the four-year period after the Davies Report (2011-March 2015). We employed a multi-source design, collecting data from core interviews (with headhunters) and contextual interviews (with other key institutional players), secondary documents and observations. Table 1 summarizes the rationale for using these data sources and explains how they informed our analysis.

[Insert Table 1 here]

### **Data collection**

**Core interviews.** Interviews with headhunters were the main data source. The sampling was purposive (Silverman, 2013) and theoretically meaningful for our research aims. We took advice from the Davies Committee in selecting participants who were key players in the field; such background knowledge is critical when interviewing elites (Mikecz, 2012). We

conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen headhunters (eight women and seven men, all White British), from the ten leading UK search firms who together make 80% of FTSE 100 board appointments. Interviewees (designated as P1 to P15 in the Findings) were very senior search consultants, typically partners specialising in FTSE 350 board appointments, involved in drafting the Code and embedding it within their firm. Interviews were conducted face to face and lasted about 1 hour. Questions explored how headhunters understood and implemented the newly adopted Code and their role in the field of WoB, focusing on specific practices in the director selection process.

**Contextual interviews.** We conducted interviews with two members of the Davies Steering Committee who acted as liaison with the headhunters, asking about the role of search firms in the broader WoB agenda, the emergence of the Code and the nature of their involvement with leading firms in the sector. This provided a complementary account concerning the agency of headhunters and additional visibility into the dynamic between the IE and headhunters as protagonists in the field. Interviews lasted 1 hour and were carried out face to face in 2015. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

**Secondary sources.** Secondary sources allowed us to situate the agency of headhunters within the broader institutional change effort related to WoB. These included: reports by the Davies committee, the Voluntary Code of Conduct by the executive search sector, and an independent review into the application of the Code.

**Observations.** Following Alvesson's (1996) call for more "naturally occurring data" in management research, we drew on personal observations as secondary data sources, in order to deepen and validate our knowledge of the context. Two authors had access to three Davies Committee meetings where the role of headhunters was discussed. Another author attended key industry events related to the role of search firms, alongside key players in the field. For

confidentially reasons, recording was not possible in these circumstances; however we took notes during and after these events.

## **Data analysis**

We moved iteratively back and forth between our guiding theories and the data, developing our understanding of the changing processes and practices. We first constructed a *timeline of events* to situate headhunters as players in the field (Appendix 1). This chronological summary clarifies their link to the Davies review. We then moved towards identifying *micro-processes of change*, using interview material as the primary data source. We aimed to capture how the role emerged, how headhunters made sense of it, and how it affected their practice. We began coding and identifying common themes across interview accounts by using ‘key orienting concepts’ (Layder, 1998). We explored the utility of several theoretical frameworks that spoke to issues of institutional change, diversity management and executive search, and eventually focused on relevant sensitizing concepts from these literatures. Specifically, sensitizing concepts from the institutional literature include change micro-processes and tactics (e.g. issue framing, logics, role redefinition). Executive selection literature alerted us to the relational and gate-keeping role of these professionals. Diversity literature prompted us to the rhetorical and practical strategies used for diversity work.

In the early stages of data analysis, we were struck by headhunters’ seemingly contradictory statements about their new role in the field (e.g. claims that they were already ‘pro-women’ versus claims that they became more inclusive after the Davies Review). We considered these contradictions as indicative of key areas of contention in the new change and diversity mandate of headhunters, and we identified six first order themes capturing them. Gradually we moved from organizing to interpreting the data (Silverman, 2013) and identified more abstract second order constructs, which we theorised to be the micro-

processes underpinning headhunters' change agency. Appendix 2 illustrates our inductive reasoning, moving from illustrative quotes to first order themes and second order constructs.

## **Findings**

The findings focus on two micro-processes that define the change agency of headhunters in the field: framing of intentionality and role redefinition by drawing on competing logics.

### **1. Framing of Intentionality**

A first area of tension concerned how headhunters framed their change behaviours. While they claimed their efforts as voluntary, headhunters justified their actions only by referring to the institutional pressures created by the Davies Report and the EU quota threat, and the commercial opportunities created by more interest for female candidates among clients. Headhunters were not instigators of change but were quiet protagonists, although critical to the institutional change process.

#### **1.1. Proactive versus Reactive**

The Davies review found that 'the informal networks influential in board appointments, the lack of transparency around selection criteria and the way in which executive search firms operate, [...] make up a significant barrier to women reaching boards' (Davies, 2011, p.7). The review required search firms to draw up the Code, articulating 'best practice which covers the relevant search criteria and processes relating to FTSE 350 board level appointments.' (Davies, 2011, p.5). These formal institutional processes pressured search firms to take up a role as diversity actors in the field. The dialogue with executive search firms was described as 'very challenging' in the beginning:

We had a lot of head-hunter pushback right at the start: “you don’t know what you’re doing, there’s just no pipeline, it’s not a problem”. I well remember those first meetings with the minister and the head-hunters... Wow hasn’t the mood changed since then? (Davies Committee member 2)

Two Davies Committee members acted as champions and facilitated regular meetings with leading headhunters in the sector, resulting in the drafting of the Code. They described these initial meetings as having ‘lots of angst and emotion on the table’ from search firms (Davies Committee member 1), who were reluctant to take responsibility for the WoB change agenda. Headhunters’ accounts supported this narrative.

Interviewees were concerned about their firm’s image in the field and keen to portray their commitment to ‘best practice’. Drafting the Code ‘that was owned by them, badged by them’ was deemed to be ‘the lesser of evils’ (Davies Committee member 1). It was largely seen by interviewees as a symbolic marker, whose role was to signal the diversity commitment of the search sector and to legitimate diversity conversations with clients. The reactive nature of headhunters’ change agency was obvious:

Why write it in the first place? The trite answer is because the Davies Report asked us to, and we (...) believe in what Davies was trying to achieve, so why wouldn’t we do whatever we can to reinforce that? (P11, male headhunter, round 2)

## **1.2 Commercial Arguments**

It was noteworthy that headhunters spent little effort making the case for more WoB and none articulated a clear vision for change. Instead, they implied a need for change by making reference to the Davies report, and justified their practices by vaguely customising the business case logic outlined in the report with caveats and rationales specific to their

profession. All interviewees recognized that a key driver for presenting more gender-balanced candidate lists was clients' increased demand for female candidates post Davies review. Commercial considerations were thus central to how they viewed their role as diversity actors.

Seven interviewees discussed experiences where clients requested all-female candidate lists, expressing doubts about 'positive discrimination' or the legality of this practice. The lack of clarity on this issue indicated changing institutional norms, confirmed in the 2014 Code review that called for the Equality & Human Rights Commission to "create appropriate guidance" (Sweeney, 2014, p.7). Issues of 'positive discrimination' and 'quotas' were dismissed by some interviewees as non-meritocratic, and over-regulation was seen as incompatible with the executive search profession. Headhunters dissociated themselves from those who 'do diversity for diversity's sake':

We are firmly of the view that there shouldn't be quotas and firmly of the view that the women we're suggesting should genuinely have the right skills to contribute. (P9 female headhunter)

While describing their efforts as 'voluntary' and claiming to have been 'pro-diversity' before the Davies review, all headhunters reported new practices and an increase in the numbers of female candidates put forward only after the Davies review. This indicated that they did not recognise the contradictions in their claims of intentionality. Some interviewees identified an opportunistic calculation that presenting more female candidates is a commercially savvy choice, 'it's a good thing to move into that space as a firm' (P15 male headhunter), and, one or two desirous to be leading the field, were open to accepting more radical change behaviour:

All female lists - it may be illegal and our general council isn't sure whether it's discrimination, but we're doing it anyway. (P5 male headhunter)

### **1.3 Voluntarism versus Regulation**

Several participants were mindful of the threat of EU-imposed quotas, and stressed the importance of achieving rapid change on UK boards through voluntary approaches in order to 'keep Europe off our backs' (P11 male headhunter). Despite acknowledging exogenous institutional pressures and regulatory threats, interviewees espoused the discourse of voluntarism established in diversity management in the UK. They viewed themselves as proactive change actors, although only three out of ten firms included in this study had been active in the WoB space prior to Davies, and most headhunters had not initially been keen to collaborate, as suggested by the Davies Committee meeting held in January 2011. During a meeting held in October 2011, a Davies Committee member reflected on the 'hyper-competitiveness' of search firms who had never come together to work on an issue; also observing a change in their interest to contribute after an event at No. 10 Downing Street hosted by David Cameron and Nick Clegg<sup>2</sup>. Strong support from both government and business seems to have been impactful, despite the anti-regulation discourse.

The approach taken by the Davies Committee towards headhunters was one of 'carrot and stick'. Annual Davies reports praised headhunters' engagement, despite their reluctant commitment early on: 'we applaud this group's commitment and continued support in helping to achieve better gender balance in the boardroom' (Davies Report 2013, p.20). Evidence from the independent Sweeney review (2014) criticised search firms for the insufficient public signalling of their commitment to diversity and recommended the creation

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<sup>2</sup> The UK's Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister



of an enhanced Code for those search firms leading the way. In September 2014 an Enhanced Code of Conduct was launched, driven by elite firms successful in appointing WoB, along with an accreditation process overseen by the Davies Committee. Based on qualitative (e.g. visibly signalling commitment to gender diversity on the firm's website) and quantitative criteria (e.g. number of female candidates placed on board annually), it offers 'voluntary regulation and reward'.

These findings demonstrate how headhunters framed their new diversity role as voluntary, despite reacting to a changing landscape of WoB, rather than driving the cause.

## **2. Role Redefinition**

The Davies Review identified headhunters as culprits for maintaining the narrow and homogenous pool of candidates via institutional logics of elite social matching. Following this scrutiny, normative cultural understandings of what constitutes an ideal candidate and a rigorous selection process were socially (re)constructed between the Chairmen and headhunters. Drawing on Callero (1994), we focus on how headhunters negotiated competing logics and redefined their roles once these logics shifted in a post-Davies era.

### **2.1 Social Matching versus Inclusive Selection Criteria**

Having previously been considered complicit in sustaining the logic of the 'ideal candidate', all headhunters commented on the importance of rethinking the selection criteria for board directors. The Code attempted to redefine competence and merit, stating that 'search firms should work to ensure that significant weight is given to relevant skills and intrinsic personal qualities and not just proven career experience, in order to extend the pool of candidates beyond those with existing board roles or conventional corporate careers' (2011, p.3). We found little consensus in headhunters' understanding of the term 'intrinsic',

variously defined as: potential, values, integrity, soft skills, competencies, personal style, personality or breadth of contribution to the board.

We laughed at the word ‘intrinsic’ as well. It’s good speak but it doesn’t actually mean anything. (P15 male headhunter)

Therefore, attempts to redefine merit in a more inclusive way (shifting from a ‘membership club’ logic to one that was talent-based) were counteracted by the vagueness of the new criteria employed, allowing the old logic to prevail. Interview accounts about specific competencies such as influencing skills and commercial insight were intertwined with references to subjective judgements such as ‘fit’, and 'being comfortable' around potential female directors. This reflects competing logics of inclusion and social matching. In version 2 of the Code, published in the Davies Report (2013, p.18), the term “intrinsic qualities” was replaced with “underlying competencies and personal capabilities”.

## **2.2 Transactional versus Developmental Role**

The spotlight shone on headhunters by the Davies Report forced them to consider how they engage with female candidates and almost all interviewees mentioned that consistent efforts had been made to include more female candidates in their firms’ databases. Typically, headhunters had a very transactional and short-term strategy, focused on opportunities for immediate placement of easily ‘marketable’ candidates – points reiterated by the Davies Committee members interviewed. This entrenched transactional approach was seen by some interviewees at odds with the new demands to be more gender inclusive – for instance, headhunters commented on how gender differences in self-promotion may lead women to come across as less viable candidates, soliciting more time to help ‘position’ them to clients. Some interviewees argued that headhunters should develop a longer-term

approach, taking on more developmental roles throughout the selection process (e.g. coaching, mentoring and advocating for female candidates), a very different logic. There was disagreement among interviewees as to whether this approach was appropriate or feasible:

I made a point that shouldn't the Code include the moral obligation for search firms to coach women coming up through the pipeline and to develop longer term relationships with them? [...] You would think I asked people to go naked; I was stunned at how vociferous they were to including anything as minimal as that. They very much saw their role as very appointment-driven, transactional. (P4 female headhunter)

This was the only area where gender differences between interviewees emerged, with more female headhunters stressing explicitly the importance of developmental support compared to male interviewees. These female headhunters seemed more willing to challenge the orthodoxy from within (Creed et al, 2010), and spend resources (expertise, credibility) embedded in their role (Callero, 1994) to help female candidates 'sell' their CV and to advocate for them with Chairmen. Revised versions of the Code (Davies, 2013) also added a provision emphasizing 'candidate support'.

Interviewees spoke about 'expanding the talent pool' by considering female candidates with less typical (non-corporate) professional backgrounds. However, the language used to describe this new pool of candidates revealed subtle gendered hierarchies. Two headhunters cautiously positioned female candidates to their clients as being 'lateral suggestions'. Another one described female candidates who do not fit the 'standard' profile in terms of experience as 'marginal', eventually admitting that the term is ill suited, in-line with previous institutional logics and positioning women as second-class candidates.

Broadening the pool of female candidates clashed with the elitist and exclusivist culture of the executive labour market. When we asked if public advertisement of board directorships would help increase diversity (a contested Davies Report recommendation) one interviewee joked about not wanting to be ‘put out of business’ (P12 male headhunter), while another one qualified the suggestion as ‘bonkers’, explaining that this measure would not be feasible given the fragile egos and reputational stakes of such high-level appointments. These findings reveal competing logics in the new role of headhunters as diversity actors, caught between the need to open up the board appointment process and the tendency to preserve the strong boundaries of corporate elites.

### **2.3 Pleasing Clients versus Challenging their Practices**

The executive search profession is client-driven; its relational nature shaped the limits and opportunities of headhunters’ role as diversity actors, given that clients’ attitudes ranged from explicitly requesting to see more women candidates, to engaging in non-inclusive selection practices. As agents of change, headhunters were mindful not to subvert the relationship they have with clients.

The Code recommended that “when presenting their long lists, search firms should ensure that at least 30% of the candidates are women” (VCC, 2011, p.3) - this was largely embraced by the headhunters interviewed, believing it to be the most impactful provision of the Code. More than half argued, however, that the aim should be to ensure women are short-listed, suggesting that women lose out at this stage. One interviewee saw this as indicative of subtle gender bias among clients.

Some headhunters were critical of their clients’ interviewing skills, commenting on excessive informality and lack of rigor in interviewing practices. While seven participants

alluded to the lack of consistency and possible bias in selection interviews, only one appeared ready to challenge and advise clients in this respect. Three headhunters raised the risk of reverting to non-inclusive practices, and believed that a critical point in the appointment process consists of supporting Chairmen to manage scepticism from other board members when faced with a final choice of a male versus female candidate:

There's a danger of constant voices of conservatism, and actually part of the value that we add is just helping the Chairman say 'No, remember what we're after.' (P11 male headhunter)

## **Discussion**

We began this article by laying out a paradox related to the agency of marginal change actors, in this case headhunters, in a unique context where they were unwittingly designated to be change agents in the WoB field by a bold IE. Our interest was to understand how these actors contributed to an institutional change effort without instigating the change, and how they took on a novel role as diversity actors, with no prior diversity agenda. Based on our findings, we describe headhunters as ‘accidental activists’ (AAs) in the broader process of institutional change related to WoB and distil two micro-processes that define their ‘accidental activism’: (1) framing their intentions and motivation as voluntary, despite recognizing external drivers of change; and (2) tactical role redefinition by drawing on competing institutional logics related to diversity management and executive selection. We expand on the significance of these findings for institutional change and diversity management scholarship.

## **Implications for institutional change literature**

We contribute to research into the micro-foundations of institutional change (Powell & Colyvas, 2008) by showcasing the logics and practices of previously neglected actors who do not match the heroic portrayal of institutional entrepreneurship, despite being active protagonists in a field (Batillana et al, 2009). Delineating the differences between IEs and AAs contributes to institutional theory by bringing new insights into a more distributed perspective on institutional change agency (Lawrence et al., 2011).

*Framing of intentionality.* Institutional entrepreneurs (IEs) are agents who organize and strategize counter-hegemonic challenges (Levy & Scully, 2007), reframe issues and theorize the need for change (Maguire et al, 2004), infuse new norms and legitimize new roles (Reay, et.al, 2006; Delbridge & Edwards, 2008). In contrast, we found that AAs invest fewer resources in these activities. Our findings problematize the notion that all change agency roles entail a deliberate agenda. Despite labelling their efforts as ‘voluntary’, AAs’ engagement in change is driven and sustained by the IE. Unlike Creed et al. (2010), who found that individuals become institutional change agents as a result of being marginalised in a field, our study shows that AAs emerged as change agents by being put under the spotlight in a field. As reactive players rather than strategic instigators of change, they legitimised new practices by referencing exogenous drivers of change and by drawing on the change vision of the IE. Our ‘accidental activist’ concept captures the paradox of this unwitting change role and strengthens our understanding of micro-processes underpinning distributed institutional change (Lawrence et al., 2011) by demonstrating that the agency of such marginal change actors relies on contradictory accounts of intentionality and is heavily legitimized by the IE.

*Competing logics and role redefinition.* Our findings support previous studies (Reay et al, 2006; Creed et al, 2010), pointing to role redefinition as an important micro-process underpinning the agency of actors. Drawing on Callero’s (1994) role theory, we demonstrate

how headhunters redefined their role as gatekeepers in the elite labor market by utilizing three types of competing logics: social matching versus inclusive selection criteria, transactional versus developmental approach to candidates, pleasing versus challenging clients. Despite the emergence of new professional norms and practices, diversity work remained partially incompatible with the executive search profession that emphasizes social fit (Tienari et al., 2013) and incentivizes client responsiveness and quick placement of candidates (Coverdill & Finlay, 1998). The existence of competing logics is not novel in institutional change (Seo & Creed, 2002) – they provide meanings and resources actors can mobilize to affect institutional change (Creed et al., 2010). However, prior scholarship posits that competing logics are strategically exploited and ultimately integrated by IEs (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) or reconciled through identity work (Creed et al., 2010). Unlike Creed et al. (2010), we found no evidence of identity work in the role redefinition undertaken by our participants, and thus argue that AAs engage in role redefinition in a more impersonal and superficial manner. Furthermore, AAs did not seem inclined to solve the tensions and contradictions engrained in competing logics. Instead, headhunters skilfully negotiated a balance between conservatism and change, in order to maintain their credibility with clients and the Davies Committee, thus echoing Creed et al (2010, p.1359) who describe the “paradoxical combination of institutional maintenance and disruption” as the only real option for “actors who wish to remain embedded”. Headhunters’ need to remain embedded and credible, while not having a coherent change agenda of their own, led to inconsistent and paradoxical use of competing logics and both disruptive and conservative selection practices. We contribute to institutional literature by demonstrating that this marginal change role is not underpinned by a gradual clear shift towards new logics as typically assumed by institutional theorists (Reay & Hinings, 2005), but rather, as recently argued by Hodgson et al. (2015), by a pragmatic and opportunistic blend of competing logics that enable actors to preserve

legitimacy while reacting to different stakeholders in the field. Our study indicates that critical to the agency of such marginal actors is their ability to stitch together competing logics rather than to transition into new ones, and that neither logic will supplant each other unless further field pressure is exerted.

What are the possibilities and perils of this role for institutional change? AAs can accelerate institutional change, as long as the IE has the reputational and practical resources to validate their actions (e.g. new professional norms and practices), and to legitimize their role in the field (Delbridge & Edwards, 2008). AAs can also slow down change by perpetuating old or competing logics. Since the motivation and strategies used by AAs are contingent on the moves of the IE and other players in the field, their commitment to change is precarious and opportunistic. Through this more muddled change agency, AAs end up nudging and tugging the field rather than leading from the front, and can have both stabilizing and destabilising effects in the field.

### **Implications for diversity management literature**

Our study extends diversity management literature, which commonly focuses on diversity actors who operate inside organizations such as HR diversity professionals and diversity champions (Kirton et al., 2007; Tatli, 2011). The concept of ‘tempered radicalism’ (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) theorizes diversity work as underpinned by genuine, intentional activism for equality and diversity. We demonstrate that diversity actors who operate from outside organizations and take on diversity as a marginal part of their remit utilize different motivations and strategies. Diversity actors are portrayed as reformers with a mission: they destabilize the status quo by using fashionable discourses to promote a cause they are committed to, they temper their radicalism and gauge their tactics (Kirton et al., 2007). Our findings show that diversity work can occur in the absence of such commitment. Broader



institutional pressures, a ‘fashionable’ debate and lucrative opportunities can be sufficient reasons to engage in diversity work as AAs. While diversity scholarship is preoccupied with how diversity actors utilise business case versus social justice arguments (Oswick & Noon, 2014), our AAs did not particularly draw on either of these arguments. Being ‘pushed’ into taking on a diversity role by the Davies review, headhunters recognized its impact in galvanising institutional change in the WoB field and in mobilising other stakeholders (e.g. their clients). As reactive players and not strategic instigators of change, headhunters were not compelled to explain *why* it is desirable to have more WoB, but rather *how* their profession might contribute to this agenda. This challenges the distinction between voluntary and mandatory diversity work (Klarsfeld et al., 2012) and demonstrates that marginal diversity actors reproduce the discourses and logics of those who drive diversity from the front – in this case enforcing a voluntaristic discourse (Ozbilgin & Tatli, 2011). We extend work by Seierstad et al. (2015) who call for more studies into the multi-actor dynamics of those involved in diversity work at board level, by demonstrating that the transfer in legitimacy for WoB initiatives is a key enabler of AAs’ agency.

While previous research found that diversity professionals incur personal and career costs for championing diversity from the front (Kirton & Greene, 2009), our study suggests that AAs are reaping commercial and reputational benefits for their diversity role from the margins. As tempered radicals, diversity professionals create change through small wins and savvy compromise, with an ambitious vision of long-term change. As AAs, headhunters also changed their practices incrementally – without pursuing a bigger change vision, but rather driven by a desire to preserve legitimacy in the field. Headhunters have a vested interest in legitimizing their service in the eyes of clients (Beaverstock et al., 2010), so their commitment to diversity was contingent on clients’ responses: they challenged and supported

clients to be more gender inclusive, but also used the logic of client responsiveness to justify a less proactive approach, colluding with clients in perpetuating exclusionary practices.

Extant studies liken executive selection to a social matching process (Khurana, 2002) that reinforces male dominance in top management (Tienari et al., 2013; Hamori, 2010). While our study reinforces this argument, it also demonstrates that gender bias can be challenged in executive selection when headhunters are pressured to change their professional norms and practices; such change is negotiated in the fragile and political relationship between headhunters, clients and other change champions in the field.

While the orientation and strategies used by these AAs are precarious compared to diversity professionals, our study raises further questions about the significance and impact of such roles in diversity management. How might the agendas of external and internal diversity actors be aligned? How can bold change agents legitimize diversity agendas and mobilize more marginal protagonists? We argue that diversity scholarship would benefit from a more distributed perspective on change agency (only recently developed by Tatli et al., 2015), to explore how coalitions of more or less committed actors might advance this agenda.

### **Limitations**

We did not seek to examine how the IE (Lord Davies) drove change in the field, so our account of his agency is not exhaustive; we focused on his role in mobilizing the executive search sector. Future research could examine how IEs and enabling field characteristics lead to the mobilization of more peripheral actors in institutional change. Future studies could also triangulate the perspectives of Chairmen or candidates working with headhunters in order to better capture the relational and situated nature of this new diversity role.

### **Practical implications**

Our findings suggest that HRM staff, diversity managers and internal diversity professionals could legitimise and enhance the effectiveness of internal diversity policies by joining efforts with extra-organizational actors doing diversity work from the margins (e.g. recruitment firms, professional associations, business clubs). The Davies review and the progress made by FTSE 100 companies in making their boards more gender balanced has been extensively covered by national media and has in itself nudged progress in smaller companies, notably the professional service firms. Therefore, outside peer pressure proved to be very effective in driving diversity forward and must be preserved by extra-organizational diversity champions. At national level, we advise policy-makers who attempt to increase the share of WoB in other countries without using quotas, to mobilize wider coalitions of concerned actors (e.g. investors, corporate governance regulators, institutes of directors, headhunters), as opposed to only corporations or governments (which has been the dominant approach so far). Finally, for those trying to instigate institutional change, our findings suggest that it is worth taking the time to identify and mobilize all stakeholders, including those who might initially seem marginal. While such marginal actors may have an opportunistic interest in change, their ‘accidental activism’ could be instrumental to bolder institutional change agents.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how marginal actors can contribute to change in institutional fields and diversity management. We respond to calls for an institutionalist frame in the study of diversity practices (Yang & Konrad, 2011) and for the application of institutional theory to understanding inequality in organizations (Lawrence et al., 2011). Examining headhunters as novel actors in the change process towards more WoB, our contribution to institutional change and diversity management scholarship consists in locating the micro-processes that underpin this opportunistic and precarious change role, described as ‘accidental activism’.

Despite its less heroic allure, we argue that this role can have a significant impact on change agendas.

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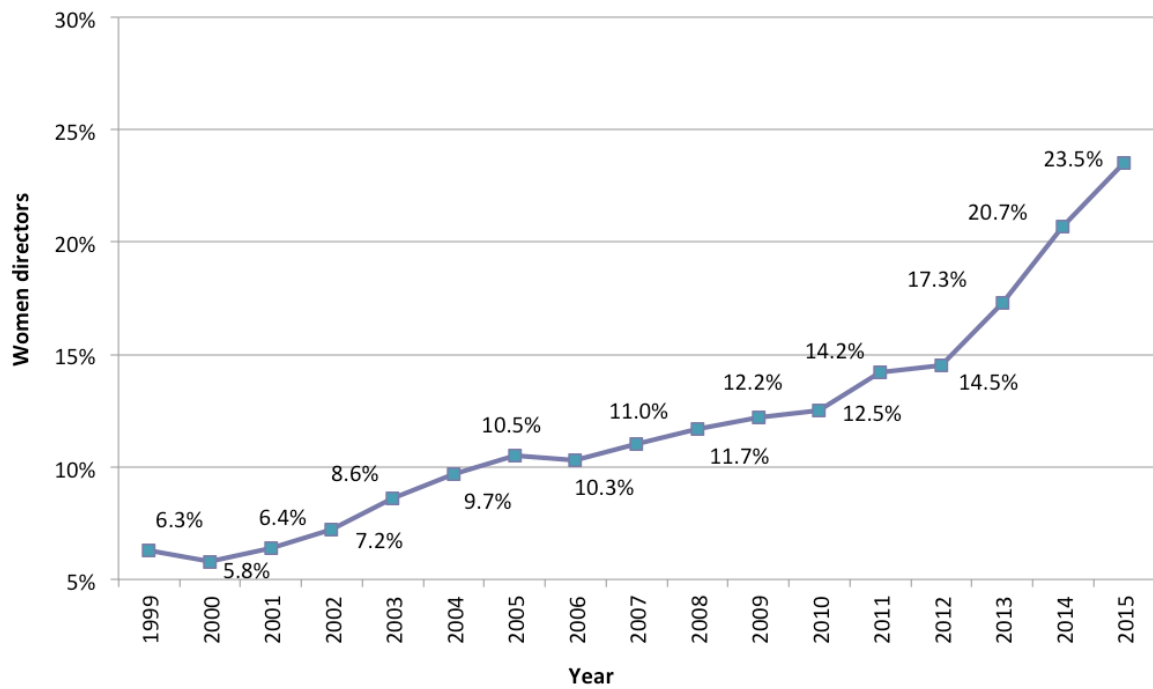
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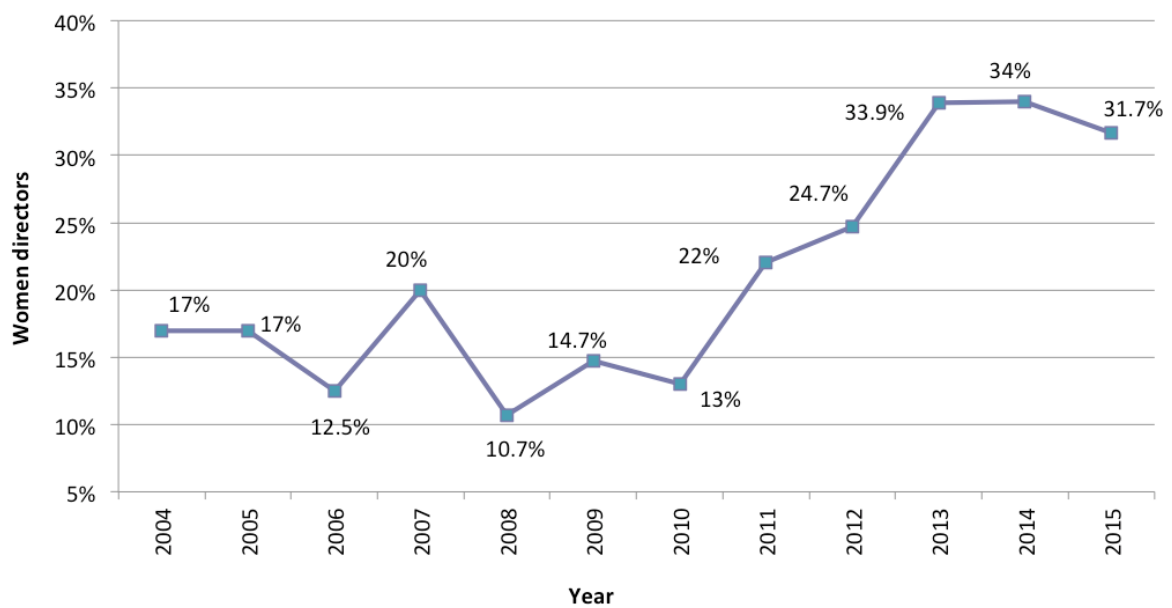
## Tables and Figures

**Figure 1: Women on FTSE 100 boards**



*Source: Vinnicombe et al (2015)*

**Figure 2: FTSE 100 board appointments going to women**



*Source: Vinnicombe et al (2015)*

**Table 1. Description of the data**

<b>Data source</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Use in analysis</b>
<i>Primary core interviews</i> Leading headhunters in the field (15 interviews conducted in 2011-2012; two follow-up interviews with opinion leaders in the field conducted in 2014-2015).	17 core interviews	- Main data source used to examine how headhunters responded to the Davies review on WoB, how they understood (logics) and implemented (practices) their new diversity role in the field
<i>Primary contextual interviews</i> Davies Committee members involved with executive search firms (2014-2015).	2 contextual interviews	- Complementary data source for the motivations and strategies of headhunters as actors in the WoB field, as construed by the IE instigating the change
<i>Secondary sources</i> Public documents pertaining to executive search and the institutional debate on WoB: - Annual Davies Committee WoB reports (5 reports 2011-2015) - Voluntary Code of Conduct of executive firms (3 versions) - Independent review of the Code, commissioned by government and Davies Committee (1 report)	6 reports 3 codes of conduct	- Reviewed to develop interview protocol prior to interviews and supplement data about issues mentioned in interviews - Used to establish timeline of events related to change in WoB field - Selectively coded for material describing the role of headhunters in the field and key issues in executive selection
<i>Observations</i> - Davies Committee meetings where search firms' role was discussed (Dec. 2010, Jan. and Oct. 2011) - Public events in executive search sector related to WoB and the Code (launch of enhanced Code - July 2013; launch of independent review into the Code – Mar. 2014)	3 meetings 2 industry events	- Gained familiarity with key debates and players in WoB field and the executive search sector - Contributed to timeline of events - Informed development of the interview protocol; used to validate key issues raised in interviews and emerging findings



### Appendix 1. Timeline of events: Headhunters' role in the WoB field

Date	Event	Significance for our research question
Sept. 2010	Set up of the Davies Steering Committee; beginning of the public consultation with stakeholders	Initial trigger, exogenous shock. Emergence of institutional entrepreneur (Lord Davies). Headhunters consulted and identified as critical to change agenda of IE
Feb. 2011	Launch of the Davies Report on WoB	Headhunters listed as key players in driving WoB change
Oct. 2011	10 Downing Street event - launch of Davies Interim Report	Davies WoB campaign endorsed by UK prime minister. Headhunters in attendance
Nov. 2011	Launch of the Voluntary Code of Conduct in the executive search sector	Consultation process with headhunters led by Davies Committee champion. Headhunters formally adopt new role
Apr. 2013	First revision of the Code	Headhunters' role redefined/expanded
Mar. 2014	Publication of the Sweeney review into the Code's application, commissioned by Lord Davies (WoB champion) & Vince Cable (Business Secretary)	Public scrutiny of headhunters as players in the field – key professional debates, 'best' practice in the field and further changes needed. Reinforcement mechanisms and change agenda set by IE.
Sept. 2014	Second revision of the Code; launch of the Enhanced Code of Conduct and of the accreditation process for search firms	Ongoing redefinition of headhunters' role. Selection criteria for board roles redefined. Formal recognition from the IE for diversity work in the WoB field.
Mar. 2012 to Mar. 2015	Annual Davies reports monitor progress for WoB campaign	Headhunters' role mentioned in all reports, highlighting link between them as protagonists in the field and Davies as IE

## Appendix 2. Micro-processes underpinning headhunters' agency in the WoB field

